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The image shows the front cover of an old book. The cover is decorated with a marbled paper pattern featuring dark, wavy lines and numerous small, light-colored spots. A dark brown, textured spine is visible on the left side. In the bottom left corner, there is a small, light-colored, rectangular label with rounded corners. The label contains the letter 'C' on the top line and the word 'Washington' on the bottom line. Below the word 'Washington', there is a small, dark, rectangular mark.

C
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LESSONS FOR OUR TIMES FROM THE LIFE OF
WASHINGTON.

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

BOSTON YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN UNION,

ON THE

EVENING OF FEBRUARY 22, 1874,

BY

ANDREW P. PEABODY.

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PREFACE.

THAT the wise and timely counsel contained in the following address might receive a wider hearing than could be obtained by a single delivery, the Board of Government of the Boston Young Men's Christian Union requested a copy for publication, believing that the example of one like Washington, who in private life was irreproachable, and through a long public career sought only the country's welfare, being freshly brought to mind, might induce many not only to emulate his example, but, at a time when corruption threatens the welfare of cities, states, and the nation itself, might lead them to measure public men by the lofty standard which his life presents.

ADDRESS.

WERE George Washington living now, there are many quarters in which he would not be deemed a great man; for he had none of those gifts by which, in our day, men grovel into power, obtain position by not deserving it, and mount to higher places by intrigue and corruption in lower. I am proud to say that there are some constituencies in our own State which might choose him to represent them in Congress; but in some of our districts he certainly would escape the disgrace of an election. In view of our political history of recent years, we might confidently pronounce him eligible to the gubernatorial chair of our Commonwealth. But such a man as he would be available for no party as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. He would pass under no yoke fashioned by a national convention, would maim or stretch himself to no platform framed of compromises and concessions, would make no pledges to his supporters, and would be regarded as incapable of distributing official patronage in due proportion to the neediness and demerit of his partizans. Men not unlike him in disinterestedness as public servants have been sometimes named for the Presidency, but no nominating body has of late been so injudicious as to adopt them.

George Washington might never have been known in his own time as a great man, had not events beyond his control, brought before the public eye qualities

which else would have been equally exercised in quiet rural life and home duties.

Of real greatness, there are two kinds, with broad specific differences.

There is, in the first place, genius, which creates, invents, shines, commands, shapes, organizes, by a necessity of its own being,—a fire in the bones which will not stay smothered, but will burn through all integuments of obscurity and unpropitious surroundings, will force its way to the public eye and ear, will make itself felt at all events, whether for good or for evil, whether to fertilize and gladden, or to scorch, blast and curse.

There is, in the second place, a greatness which consists, not in inspiration and impulse, but in substantial ability. This, indeed, always shows itself, but it may be in a contracted sphere; for it is free from self-seeking and the coarse ambition for display, and it is satisfied with doing the work given it to do, because, however small that may seem, there is no amount of soul and strength that may not be put into it. Thus, though we can hardly imagine with the poet a "mute, inglorious Milton," there is doubtless many a "village Hampden," capable of very great things, yet finding all his powers of mind and heart fully occupied in the exercise of a true manhood in his own daily affairs, and in the elevation of the tone of feeling and character in his own immediate circle. Such men are not made, but are called out, by the stress of public need. They are ready-made. God always has unset jewels on hand, and his providence sets them as they are wanted. Our Revolution did not make the great men whose names it has rendered illustrious. It found them at the forge, at the plough, behind the counter, where they would

have remained, and done service to be recorded only in heaven, had not the times demanded their aid at the council-board and on the field. We have unquestionably as many great men of this sort as ever. Our late rebellion left us no room to doubt this. But there is now little demand for their services. When our ship of state shall be tossed among the breakers, and such steersmen as are running it into shoal water shall drop the helm in terror, the cry for help will bring out strong men, before hardly heard of, to the rescue.

Of these two kinds of greatness, the second is much more common than the first. Genius is rare. Were it not so, its creations would be much less prized, — would be less exciting, stimulating, instructive, edifying. Genius has an unlimited power of self-diffusion in space and time. The poet may be read all the world over. The master-work of art may survive empires and races. But the very enjoyment derived from poetry or art depends on its rareness. Were every newspaper rhymester a Homer, or every dauber of canvas a Raphael, the Iliads would not find readers, nor the Sistine Madonnas purchasers. Not so, however, with superior ability. That never comes amiss, or is developed to excess; for nothing that ought to be done, can be done too well. The capacity for this kind of greatness is very common. To a certain degree, it resides in every child or youth of intelligence and probity; that is, every such child or youth may train himself to act his part in life excellently well, to put work of the best quality into whatever he does, to make a small place great by the skill and fidelity with which he fills it, and to occupy with equal skill and fidelity a large place, should God so require and man so need.

This last description of greatness belonged to Washington; and although he holds an unrivalled eminence in American, I might almost say in human, history, his eminence has nothing in it inaccessible, and his life is full of lessons from which we may all be learners. To some of these lessons I will now ask your attention.

Self-conquest and the self-control thence resulting, were the foundation of Washington's character. All accounts of his early life represent him as having been, by nature, vehement, impetuous, passionate, to an intense degree; and there are traditions that have found place in no written record—which, if not literally true, are, like all myths, truth-like—according to which he must have had as stubborn a temper as man ever had to do battle with. In his military life there were two or three occasions when his earlier self seems to have assumed a momentary ascendancy, so that for a brief period he lost his self-command, and became almost frantic. But in his biography as a whole nothing strikes us more than his perfectly even temper. Mean rivalries and intrigues, broken promises from the confederated colonies and their representatives, delays, disappointments, failures, defeats, even ignominious treachery, found him serene, dispassionate, patient, forbearing, considerate. His entire self-possession inspired courage in desperate emergencies. By means of his quiet perseverance, defeat often bore the fruit of victory. His conciliatory temper harmonized jealous and hostile elements. His serene magnanimity won friends from among those who at first envied his rank, depreciated his merits, undervalued his services. Where precipitancy would have been fatal, he knew how to wait, and to quell the discontent of those whose

haste would have been destruction. What the quaint old Latin poet says of the Roman general, Fabius,

“One man by slow delays restored our fortunes,
Preferring not the people’s praise to safety,
And thus his after-glory shines the more,”

was pre-eminently true of Washington.

Here we have an interior history whose details never have been and never could be written, but without which our hero, patriarch, sage, would have lived and died a hot-headed, reckless Virginian cavalier and slave-driver, and for aught that appears in history, our armies would have wanted a leader fit for the charge, and our revolution might have been but an unsuccessful rebellion. What fierce internal conflicts must have preceded this settled calm! How firm, how rigid, how uncompromising the self-restraint, the self-chastening! What rebellious uprisings of the smothered passions! What victory won in after life can have borne comparison in grandeur with the victories won in this warfare within? What trophies so enduring as those of the conquered selfhood?

Young men, self-conquest, self-control is the prime essential to your success, whatever your career. In some form, this work, if not already done, remains to be done. The enemy to be subdued may be appetite or passion, the love of pleasure or the love of ease, cupidity or ambition. Whatever it be, you must bring it under control, or it will master you and make you its slave. The haste to be rich is more likely than anything else to render you poor; the haste to climb causes many a disastrous fall; and like perils attend everything excessive or inordinate in temper and character. Especially, if you would control others, you

must be your own masters. No teacher can govern a school who cannot govern himself. No merchant or manufacturer can maintain discipline, order and co-operation among those in his employ, unless he is under his own control. No man can exert the influence which his ability and culture might give him, unless passion and appetite are subject to reason and conscience.

Say not that you are constitutionally liable to such and such passions and proclivities, and that therefore you cannot maintain strict self-restraint and self-government. The constitutional liability may exist; but if God has suffered these fiery coursers to run through your veins, he has given you reins and bits by which you can bend them to your will, and gain ever new strength by restraining and guiding them.

Another lesson is to be drawn from Washington's sublime disinterestedness. There never was a more entire absence of self-seeking. It was little that he should have refused all pecuniary emoluments; for the greed for money, though not wanting in contractors and petty officials, had not yet invaded the high places of the land, and a cupidity now venial, would have then been an indelible stigma. But fame had no charm for him. There is not a single incident in his career in which his own personal reputation seems to have been an inspiring motive; while there were numerous instances in which he incurred temporary reproach and obloquy for the safety of the public cause, when it might have seemed brave and glorious to hazard it on the success of a dashing assault or a brilliant enterprise. When misunderstood, he made no attempt to set himself right, except when the public interest demanded it. At the close of the war,—with

the army full of discontent, paid in great part by an almost worthless currency, reluctant to return to civil life without adequate security for just arrears of wages, amenable to no control but his—he would but have followed precedent had he made himself a military dictator; and to his utter unselfishness alone was the country indebted for the disbanding of the troops and the re-establishment of civil order. It is evident that when at the call of the nation he came again from retirement to the Presidential chair, and when he suffered himself to be re-elected, it was with a consciousness of sacrifice, and with no thought of personal aggrandizement. Indeed, he seems to have been the only person in the land who was unaware that he was a great man; but there is not a token in his writings of any glimmering of consciousness on his part that he had become the cynosure of all eyes, the pride of his country, the glory of his age.

This unconsciousness is always a characteristic of the highest merit. Really great men have wrought the very services that have given them imperishable renown, simply because the occasions came in their way, unaware that they were doing great things,—amazed, even abashed and humbled when they found the world's regard fixed upon them.

On the other hand, there is no surer soul-death, no more inevitable paralyzing of worth and force, than self-exaltation and self-praise. The shadow of self blights growth, maims power, cripples influence. There are men, in some aspects almost great, in others pitifully small, because they will not stand out of their own shadows. There are men who have the ability and the will to perform the most valiant service for one and another great cause,—who are wise, brilliant,

- eloquent; who yet have been of little or no worth to their fellow-beings, simply because they are willing to do nothing without securing full credit for it,—to rear no column in the temple of regenerated humanity, unless they can inscribe their names on its capital.

Do you ask how you are to suppress self-flattering thoughts when you are doing your best? I ask in reply, Is your best any more than your duty,—any more than you ought to do? Are you not blame-worthy before both God and man when you do anything less than your best? Have you not, when you do less, ample reason for shame and for a feeling of inward disgrace? To take an illustration from a striking parable of our Saviour, you do not specially praise or reward a servant for merely doing the work which you hired him to do, though you would blame him if he did not do it. The best you can do is simply your allotted work as God's servant. You have no right to do less; you cannot do more.

Now in all really great servants, in all eminently useful men and women, in all the excellent of the earth, you will trace tokens of the feeling that they are doing no more than the best they can fittingly do, as the servants of God and man. If you, my friend, have a strong sense of duty, you will feel thus; if you have not a strong sense of duty, you can do nothing as it ought to be done. There is no surer sign of a defective conscience than self-complacency and self-praise.

Another striking trait of Washington's character is the absence of striking traits. There is hardly a personage in history whose character is so smoothly rounded. You can name the special virtues of most good men, and that, simply because they have deficiencies, if not gross faults; for prominence implies cor-

responding depression. Washington's character is to many persons uninteresting,—it lacks picturesqueness, just because there are in it no eccentricities, which are always foibles,—no sharp angles, which always show a lack of self-discipline and self-poise,—hardly any marks of strong emotion, and that, not because he was emotionless, but because there was no ebbing of the full tide of loyalty, patriotism, warm devotion to the service of God and man. This entire roundness of character has been wanting in not a few of the great men of history, of our history; and the lack of it, while it has given a piquant alternation of lights and shadows to their biography, has impaired their worth as public servants, and damaged their reputation.

In Washington's character we may especially mark the stress he laid on what are often called (yet mis-called) the lesser moralities. As an instance of this in which he is peculiarly worthy of imitation, I might cite his rigid punctuality. He carried this virtue to the extreme to which it ought to be always carried. On one occasion, when he visited this city as President of the United States, and was going hence, to Salem I believe, he had named the hour of departure to the captain of his expected escort. The escort was a few minutes late, and found that the President was already on his way, unattended. In his eventful life, it is impossible to say of what incalculable benefit this punctuality may have been to the public service; how many critical moments there may have been, which, lost, would have been beyond recall; what promptness it must have inspired in his subordinates; how it must have facilitated the performance of all official business; how it must have been a point of sup-

port for all who were associated with him in arduous trust and duty.

In this respect we cannot be too rigid with ourselves. The breach of punctuality is dishonesty. It steals from others time, which is often worth more than money. It betrays a lack of strict conscientiousness, and we need never be surprised if the laxity thus manifested breaks out in other directions, and inflicts irreparable damage on the character and the life-work. The time-element enters so largely into every form of duty, that without a careful observance of it nothing can be fittingly done.

A like estimate ought to be made of all the lesser virtues and duties, as they are too often called. Lesser they are not; for the duty of the moment in all its parts is of supreme importance, and great things cannot be done well unless the details are faithfully performed. The bolt omitted sinks the ship. The pivot misplaced stops the machinery. The one soft spot bursts the boiler. Thus in business, any degree of slackness or negligence, any carelessness as to promises, any violation of good faith, though it be the result of mere inadvertency, may be of incalculable damage to others, and may reflect corresponding injury on your own reputation, success and prosperity. Moreover, the fully rounded character of which I have spoken—the highest perfection that man can attain—is built up of little things, formed by small occasions, tested by petty temptations; and no one can become fit for great trusts who has not been first faithful in small trusts, while he who neglects little matters of right and duty will fall by little and little.

Washington's life, in the next place, illustrates, as few others do, the power of character. He was more

than anything he did. There were generals in the army more accomplished in military science; but none inspired the confidence which was reposed in him. There were with him in the cabinet abler diplomatists and financiers; but it was around him, not them, that the disorganized elements of our national life crystallized. His power of character—the pure, disinterested, lofty soul which he put into all his work, and which infused itself into all that was done under his leadership—alone sustained our people through the deadly conflict with the mother country, and in the not one whit less perilous conflict with divided counsels, anarchy and threatened or incipient rebellion, through which the nation struggled into being. His words and acts were but multiplicands, of which the mass of soul that was in him was the far greater multiplier.

This is a principle of universal application. What you can effect depends on what you are. You put your whole self into all that you do. If that self be small, and lean, and mean, your entire life-work is paltry, your words have no force, your influence has no weight. If that self be true and high, pure and kind, vigorous and forceful, your strokes are blows, your notes *staccatos*, your work massive, your influence cogent,—you can do what you will. Whatever your position, you are a power, you are felt as a kingly spirit, you are as one having authority. Too many think of character chiefly in its relation to the life beyond the grave. I certainly would not have less thought of it with reference to that unknown future, on the margin of which some of us undoubtedly are at this moment standing. But I do wish that more consideration were bestowed upon its earthly uses. I would have young men, as they start in in life, regard character as a capital, much

surer to yield full returns than any other capital, unaffected by panics and failures, fruitful when all other investments lie dormant, having as certain promise in the present life as in that which is to come.

We have abundant reason to believe that Washington's character rested on a basis of firm religious principle. This is evident from the stainless record of purity and probity that has come down to us of his youth; from his reverent attendance on the rites of Christian worship and communion; from his uniform recognition of the Divine providence, and his modest, yet fervent expressions of trust in the Infinite Wisdom and Love; from a tone of spirit so high as to be accounted for only by familiar converse with the Highest; from a life saintly in its intense solemnity, in its unswerving rectitude of purpose, in the entireness of its consecration to the noblest aims and uses. I, for one, do not believe that such a character could have been formed and maintained, except in the school of Christ.

Though our sphere of service be insignificant as compared with his, it is none the less true for us, that a character strong and loyal, faithful and kind, noble and gentle, simple and pure, can be formed in no other school. When I consider the multiplied temptations of our time to sensuality, worldliness, selfishness, loose interpretations of the right, and unfair methods of gain and advancement, I can see no stable foundation for a true and worthy life but the foundation laid by God in Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Example may mislead. The love of approbation may gratify itself by the mere outward semblance of the right. Surrounding opinion may often be on the side of evil. All lower motives may be wrenched or overborne.

But in the soul that fears and loves God, omnipotence is incarnated in human weakness. Prayer and sin cannot co-exist. He who is thus fortified, may encounter all forms of evil, may dwell even where Satan's seat is, and come off more than conqueror.

Finally, the example of Washington has its lessons of prime importance with regard to our duty as citizens. We have taken for our motto, "Not men, but measures;" and we accordingly have chosen for our lawgivers and rulers those whom we can most easily suborn as our tools and mouthpieces. It was not measures, but men, and chief of all, the one man, that gave us our national existence. In resources and policy, in all elements of success but men, the advantage was immeasurably on the side of the mother country; but we had men invincible in war, and holding a place from which no force on earth could dislodge them in the hearts of the people.

"Not measures, but men," should be the motto of a representative government. The theory of such a government is that the people may judge of the wisdom and integrity of the men whom they choose; but that the measures which the whole nation needs can be ascertained only by a broad view from a central position, by the comparison of conflicting interests and opinions, and by careful and prolonged discussion. For this work men who will bind themselves in advance to measures as the price of office, are for the most part unfit. Even when they are intellectually competent, the very conditions on which they hold their places are fatal to their independence.

Moreover, corrupt men vitiate measures; for the best measures must be carried out by human agency,

and no method of public service can be devised, even by an omniscient wisdom, which would not be made baneful and hateful in the hands of venal party hacks. The very system of bribery and intrigue which pervades all departments of official trust and patronage, where political subserviency is the condition on which places of honor and profit are to be won and retained, is of itself an enormous public evil, ruining characters by the thousand, and placing those ruined characters where their depraving influence may be ramified and filtered through all classes and grades of society. But choose the best men, and leave them free,—you may then be assured of the best measures, even if they be not those which from your point of view might seem preferable; and, what is of still more worth, you may then be assured of examples of truth and integrity in high places, from which a guiding light, pure, genial and unflickering, will be shed over the whole land.

Above all, remember that your political functions are duties for which you are accountable to your country and your God,—that in aiding in the elevation of bad men or unfit men to office, you become criminally responsible for the evil you help them do,—that, as their abettors and accomplices, you merit your full share in their condemnation.

Members of the Christian Union, I have performed the task to which you summoned me, not as I would, but as I could, with crowded engagements which have prevented my fresh study of the life, and examination of the writings, of the illustrious man whose birth we celebrate. His is a glory which grows with time, and

culminates only the more rapidly with the decline of civic virtue. It is a light by which we may rekindle our waning fires. So long as this one venerated name shall be honored, we will not wholly despair of our country; for there must be among those who cherish the memory of our Chief and Father, some who will learn of him that righteousness and truth alone can be the stability of our land and our time.

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